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The Brook, Chatham

The Brook (/brʊk/), historically the Old Bourne River,[2] is a significant street and area in Chatham, Kent.[3] Originating as a natural stream, it played a crucial role in the town's early development.[4][5] It was known for 19th-century slums[6] and public health issues.[7] Today, it serves as a main road[8] with civic and commercial functions.[9]

History

The Brook is a route that follows the course of a formerly open stream (historically called the Old Bourne River).[2] In its earliest days the Brook valley[10] was a shallow watercourse ("a rivulet… now covered over")[11] feeding into the River Medway at Holborn Wharf,[4] adjacent to Sun Pier.[12]

Romano-British cremation urn burials

In 1907–1910, eleven Romano-British cremation urn burials were uncovered on The Brook during construction of a mission church. Excavations for the church's foundations encountered multiple inhumation pits and urn burials. Eleven pottery urns containing cremated remains were recovered, with finds recorded in 1910. A Kent County Council report summarizes: "Eleven Romano-British urns were found in 1910, with pseudo Samian, Durobrivian and other wares". In Roman Britain, such urn burials typically represent the cremated remains of individuals interred in vessels; the number of urns suggests a small cemetery or ritual deposit.

After their discovery, the urns were briefly housed in the Chatham Technical Institute, a local museum and school. However, the assemblage has since been lost: the Sites and monuments record notes that the finds "are no longer in Chatham Technical Institute; they were dispersed some time ago", and their present whereabouts are unknown. Thus, detailed analysis of the pottery and human remains is limited to the 1911 report by G. Payne[13] and later summaries. Despite their dispersal, the urn burials at The Brook remain important evidence of Roman-period activity and funerary practice in the Chatham area, complementing other nearby Romano-British cemeteries and settlements.[14]

19th century on

By the early 19th century the stream had become heavily polluted[15] and surrounded by dense low-class housing,[16] so that it was associated with poverty and disease.[17] Dr Thomas Stratton was "worried that the marines had caught cholera because they lived near the Brook."[18] and he warned of the public health hazard posed by the foul stream.[19] Over time the Brook was culverted and built over (the modern road lies atop its course),[20] and a formal sewerage and pumping scheme was installed in the 1920s, which opened in 1929,[21] to carry away the polluted water.[22]

By the late 19th century, the open Brook had essentially been covered and the valley built up.[20] In 1911, Rochester and Chatham jointly undertook a main drainage scheme, culminating in the opening of the Brook Pumping Station in September 1929.[21][23] This brick pumping station (now a working museum)[24][25] was designed to lift foul sewage from the low-lying Brook area into the new sewer outfall,[22] completing the town's modern sewage system.[26] During this period the old Brook valley was leveled into a roadway (now called The Brook)[27] and the surrounding slums were gradually cleared.[28] By 1930 many of the dilapidated houses on and around The Brook had been demolished for health reasons.[28] In the 1970s, the area underwent further redevelopment: the Pentagon Shopping Centre was built over former housing and alleys on the site, fundamentally reshaping the street grid around The Brook.[29]

Sewerage history

Chatham's first settlement, known as Ceteham,[31][32] lay on low-lying marsh by the Medway estuary,[33] bounded by an earth embankment known as the Land Wall.[34] Built in the 16th century, this causeway (roughly the line of modern Globe Lane served as a flood defense across

The Brook

A231

Old Bourne River

Aerial view of The Brook, facing towards the Dock Road & Globe Lane junction

Location within Kent

Former name	Old Bourne River
Part of	A231 road[1]
Namesake	Old Bourne River (former watercourse)
Owner	Medway Council
Length	550 m (1,800 ft)
Tourist routes	Charles Dickens childhood home, The Brook Theatre, Old Brook Pumping Station
Location	Chatham, Kent, England (within Chatham Central and Brompton ward)
Quarter	Chatham Town Centre
Postcode	ME4 4NZ
Coordinates	51.3642°N 0.5210°E
OS grid reference	TQ 758 681
North end	Dock Road (near Chatham Waterfront bus station)
Major junctions	Dock Road (A231), Globe Lane / Waterfront Way, Military Road, Queen Street, Slicketts Hill, High Street (A2) at Union Street
South end	High Street at Union Street
Other	
Known for	Follows former Old Bourne River; 19th-c. slums; Charles Dickens's childhood

	home; Brook Theatre; Brook Pumping Station
Status	Open; part of A231 road
Website	https://www.medway.gov.uk

Globe Lane, Chatham, follows the line of the 16th-century Land Wall embankment that once protected the low-lying marshes of the Old Bourne River (2010)[30]

the mouth of the Old Bourne River.[30] An early tide mill stood on the Brook by the late medieval period.[35][36] The Land Wall's embankment, together with a stone quay wall along the Medway, effectively turned the central part of Chatham into a "cupped hand" with poor natural drainage.[37] By the 18th century the marshland south-east of the Land Wall had been drained and the Brook channelled into narrow open trenches and culverts that acted as primitive sewers. These covered drains, supplemented by countless cesspits, ran beneath the growing town. Earlier, the Navy Commissioners had been ordered to repair the wharf, installing two posts and a chain to reserve it exclusively for State use. The 1694 and 1697 Estimates even list "Keeper of the Key of Landwall, £1," and in 1712 locksmith Richard Burton billed 15 s. for repairing the Land Wall barrier lock and crafting a new key.[38] The population in the Brook area increased rapidly:[39] in 1801, Chatham had about 10,500 residents,[40] rising to ~37,000 by 1901.[41] Over the 18th–19th centuries the former marsh was densely built up with poor housing and narrow alleys.[42] The young Charles Dickens lived briefly at 18 St Mary's Place, The Brook during 1821–1822. Throughout the 19th century, waste disposal remained primitive – streets and houses relied on cesspits and old culverts for sewage, and in dry weather sanitation was notoriously bad. Even early 19th-century records, the court leet archives, noted increasing public-health concerns and pollutants killing off oyster beds and fish in the River Medway.[43]

For context, as of 2021 Chatham's estimated population is around 76,983.[44]

Public health crises and local reform (19th century)

Chatham suffered disease outbreaks that underscored its sanitation failures. Sporadic cases of cholera appeared by the 1830s; notably, in spring 1832 a sailor in Chatham died of cholera (the first Kent case after entry from London).[45][46] Chatham Dockyard endured cholera too: an 1832 dockyard epidemic prompted the Admiralty to order that any cholera-stricken worker be sent to hospital and paid during isolation.[47] Cholera was so rampant that the Brook area was declared off-limits to the troops.[48] Further cholera epidemics and other contagious diseases (e.g. diphtheria in late Victorian times) struck Kent's Medway towns,[49] intensifying pressure for sanitary reform. In 1852, a board of health survey (by engineer Edward Gotto) documented Chatham's diseases and "stinking drains, recommending modern sewers."

Under the Public Health Act 1848, Chatham adopted a formal Local board of health in 1849.[50][51] This new board took over the medieval Court Leet's civic duties (the Board of Health was effectively the town's sanitary authority).[52] Through the 1850s–1880s the Local Board (later called an urban sanitary district) oversaw modest sewerage improvements.[53] Reports and vestry minutes (parish records) from this era mention hiring scavengers to remove refuse, cleansing gutters, and draining swamps in an ad hoc fashion, though much waste still lay in open drains. The Brooklyn-style culverts in The Brook were occasionally cleared or relined, but no comprehensive system existed.

Victorian expansion and drainage schemes

By the late 19th century, it became clear that Chatham (together with neighbouring Rochester and Gillingham) needed a unified solution. After surveying options, Chatham's council established a drainage committee in 1911, under the mayor, Alderman E.A. Billingshurst, and engineer W.H. Radford.[54] This committee developed plans for a Rochester & Chatham Joint Main Drainage Scheme. In 1920 a formal Joint Sewerage District was constituted by government order (through the Ministry of Health) for Rochester, Chatham and Gillingham,[55] and the Rochester and Chatham Joint Sewerage Board[56] was created.

Motney Hill treatment works during an open day, three men inspecting the water flow over a weir

Construction followed in the 1920s. The £650,000 scheme[57] (over £34 million today)[58] laid a large intercepting sewer from Chatham, under New Road and Gillingham, out to a treatment works at Motney Hill on the Rainham Marshes.[59] The works included a pumping station on Solomons Road in Chatham's Brook area to lift sewage from the low-lying town into the main outfall. The Brook Low Level Pumping Station[60] opened on 25 September 1929,[61] finalising the joint drainage scheme.[62]

Engineering of the main drainage works

The pumping station was designed to deal with Chatham's chronic flooding and sewage.[63] Its underground sewage tank has foundations about 28 feet (8.5 m) deep (cutting through the bed of the Brook),[64] a major engineering challenge.[65] The station's machinery, now preserved, consisted of multiple pumps: two 6 in (150 mm) and two 8 in (200 mm) Blackstone centrifugal pumps, driven by electric motors, for normal and storm flows, plus two large 14 in (360 mm) pumps driven by 56 horsepower (42 kW) Campbell diesel engines.[64] In normal weather the smaller pumps handled up to 150,000 imp gal (680,000 L) per hour of sewage. In storm surges, the larger pumps boosted capacity to about 600,000 imp gal (2,700,000 L)/hour, discharging excess via a dedicated storm tower into the Medway.[66]

During flood conditions, the station could even pump diluted effluent directly over the quayside into the river, minimizing street flooding. By 1979, a modern electric pumping station replaced the old plant, and the Old Brook building survives as a scheduled monument and working museum.

Social history

19th-century slum conditions

c. 1950s street scene of The Brook, showing the Army and Navy Hotel, period architecture, and a Chatham & District double-decker bus[67]

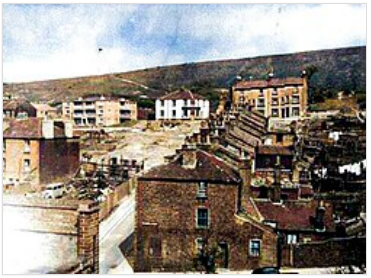
By the early 19th century, Chatham had become a busy military and naval depot,[68] spurring rapid population growth.[69][70] The Brook ran through one of the town's poorest neighborhoods, and over time, housing in the low-lying Brook valley deteriorated into a notorious slum district.[71][72] Contemporary accounts note that this "once desirable area" of Chatham went into steep decline: by the 1800s it was synonymous with poverty, overcrowding and squalor.[73] Hundreds of workers and their families crowded into tiny alleys and courts off The Brook – places with names like Cage Lane,[74] Queen Street, Sly Kates (Slicketts) Hill[75] and others – where 19th-century observers described a "moral element…difficult to subjugate".[76] One long-time resident recalled that in the mid-20th century, Cage Lane – now known as Upbury Way,[74] located north of The Brook, was regarded as so rough that local families kept away: "we considered ourselves to be a cut above Cage Lane," they recalled.[77] The cellars and narrow courts here were poorly ventilated and subject to periodic flooding; local health reports complained that the Brook's pollution was killing oyster beds downstream.[78] Overcrowding fostered sickness, vice and disorder. The Brook slums were said to attract large numbers of transients – especially naval and military men on shore leave – looking for cheap drink and company. Numerous public houses lined the valley. For example, the Duke of Cambridge,[79] built 1856–1864, at Fair Row,[80] at the eastern foot of The Brook) catered especially to officers and civilians from the nearby dockyard.[81] The Mitre Hotel on High Street, demolished in 1934,[82] was similarly renowned as a tavern for soldiers and sailors. In this environment police often faced crowds and riots: one study recounts that in the 1870s–80s Chatham was racked by "wild behaviour… descending into riot" on a regular basis, involving not only drunken soldiers and sailors but also local youths.[83] It was said that merely arresting a rowdy brawler "set off a chain reaction" of stone-throwing mobs aiming to free their comrades. In short, by the mid-19th century Chatham's Brook quarter had a "bowerbird of vice" reputation – the type of Dickensian slum quarter evoked in contemporary literature.[83][84]

The Brook in Victorian Chatham: red-light district and vice

Photograph of Queen Street in Chatham, with the Three Cups pub on the left. The building on the right was a grocer's until 1909, after which it became the Rob Roy.

The Brook – a narrow street linking Chatham's dockyard to the High Street – gained a notorious reputation in the 19th century as a rough, disreputable quarter. By the late 1800s, contemporary observers noted that the once-desirable residential area around The Brook had become "identified with dreadful living conditions, not to say immoral and criminal activity".[83] A 19th-century memoirist recalled that "the road that led from the dockyard gate to London went through an area of Chatham known as The Brook, notorious for many dens and brothels where sailors… could expect to be robbed".[85] Police and reformers lamented that low-paid dockyard workers and transient soldiers were preyed upon here by unscrupulous madams. Dickens, who grew up at St Mary's Place in The Brook, later depicted Chatham as a rowdy military town, for example, *The Pickwick Papers* notes crowds gathering in "the utmost bustle and excitement" for a military review,[86] reflecting the town's gritty character.[87]

The Brook was lined with dozens of ordinary pubs, beer-houses and lodging-houses – many associated in the public mind with prostitution.[88] For example, an 1864 directory lists the White Lion at the eastern end of The Brook and the White Swan just above Cage Lane, among other taverns along the street.[89] Further west toward the High Street stood the Lord Nelson opposite Willmott Street and the Three Cups on the corner of Queen Street.[89] (An 18th-century will likewise refers to the Three Cups pub *on the Brook*.)[90] These establishments catered to the dockyard and garrison clientele. The local press of the era regularly reported fights and rowdy behavior in and around the Brook's pubs, often linking them with prostitution. Letters to Kent newspapers complained of general disorderliness and the high number of prostitutes at The Brook's drinking-houses. In short, The Brook and adjacent High Street were seen as the town's red-light district, a place of cheap beer, gambling, and illicit rendezvous.



Clearing of slum housing in The Brook area during urban renewal efforts in the 1950s

To police and clergy The Brook seemed a hotbed of vice. During the period when the Contagious Diseases Acts applied to Chatham[91] (from 1864 until repeal in 1886), plain-clothes Metropolitan police were dispatched into the military towns specifically to curb venereal disease.[92] Chatham was designated a "subjected area" under these acts, meaning suspected prostitutes could be forcibly examined and, if found infected, confined for treatment.[93][83] In practice, officers would sweep through areas like The Brook, arresting women on suspicion and requiring them to report for invasive medical inspections.[83]

One contemporary account explains: "Policemen… arrest[ed] suspected prostitutes… subjected [them] to what was often a forcible examination. If… venereal disease was present, the woman… [could be] taken to a lock hospital – so called because the patients were locked up – where she would be detained until cured, a process that could take months."[93] Chatham even built its own purpose-built lock hospital in 1869 to house and treat women detained under the Acts.[94][95][96] These measures, however, were controversial: local reformers and national activists (notably Josephine Butler) criticized the Acts as unjustly targeting women and tacitly condoning prostitution.[93][83] Once the Acts were suspended in 1883

(and fully repealed in 1886), police observations suggest that street prostitution around The Brook resurged, underscoring how pervasive the trade had been.[83][93] An excerpt notes: "Statistical evidence relating to the ages of Kentish prostitutes is scarce and contradictory and has to be used with care. Of the 590 women admitted to the Chatham lock hospital during the six months to March 1871, for example, only 35 (6 per cent) were under 20 years old."[97]

Historical photo of The Brook passing King Street, Chatham, c. 1920s. Every building visible here was later demolished during 20th-century slum clearance and urban reform, leaving the area today unrecognizable

Chatham's 19th-century councils and philanthropists also moved to reshape the Brook's image through urban renewal. After Chatham became a municipal borough in 1890,[98] many of the oldest houses and pubs around The Brook were demolished as substandard or crime-ridden.[83] Leading citizens had long complained that the narrow courts and alleys off the Brook were slums where disease spread easily. Reports from the 1870s describe The Brook as "badly drained and ventilated" and littered with mud, contributing to cholera and fever outbreaks.[83] Civic reformers saw connection between this squalor and the area's immoral reputation, and they targeted it for clearance. As a result, within a few years of incorporation the site of The Brook was partly re-planned: the old dens and brothels gave way to wider streets, municipal buildings (including the Town Hall and police station), and modern housing.[83]

Queen Street. Many of the buildings pictured have since been demolished for newer housing developments (August 2008)

Adam Stigant

Adam Stigant – long-serving Chairman of Chatham's local Board of Health – was a leading figure in these civic reforms. This system – funded by central government – kept local rates down, and Stigant and his allies initially supported it. However, after the Acts were suspended, Stigant warned that things had gone badly wrong. In 1888 he reported to Parliament that "disease is rampant amongst... the more numerous class of young girls now given to prostitution" in Chatham,[99] and that hundreds of girls had been "ruined body and soul" by the loss of regulation. He defended the Acts as having served to "minimize the evils of vice" in garrison towns and deplored critics who labeled them a "legalization of vice".[100] In related testimony Stigant noted that local industry was feeding the vice trade. He told an 1881 Commons committee that newly-opened textile factories employed many young women, many of whom "spend their evenings in dancing saloons" and then "walk the streets" at night, and he admitted these mills "have had a tendency... to feed the class of prostitutes".[101] In Stigant's view, moral reform of prostitutes was a long-term task, so immediate efforts focused on sanitary regulation and modest policing of The Brook rather than costly crusades. He argued that local authorities should concentrate on medical treatment of disease and maintenance of public order (within the limits of existing budgets) to mitigate The Brook's vice district.[102]

Throughout, Victorian Chatham's newspapers and records provide glimpses of individuals involved. A few names of brothel-keepers and prostitutes appear in court reports, though the records are scattered. One 1865 case, for example, charged a woman with keeping a "disorderly house" used for prostitution. Frequent police raids are noted: even into the 1920s, Chatham court papers show elderly dames... being sent to jail again and again for brothel-keeping in The Brook".[85] Public houses themselves were sometimes accused of serving as fronts. In sum, contemporary language – whether in press or police reports – uniformly portrays The Brook as the town's vice quarter. Its dens, disorderly houses and liquor-sodden alleyways were repeatedly criticized as scourges on public morality.[83][85]

By the early 20th century the towns official histories noted that The Brook had been transformed from its Victorian disreputable past.

Medway Board of Guardians

The Medway Board of Guardians was established in 1835 under the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834.[103] This act reorganized poor relief by grouping parishes into larger Poor Law Unions (each large enough to support a workhouse). In southeast Kent this created the Medway Union, covering the parishes of Chatham, Gillingham, Rochester (the St Nicholas and St Margaret parishes plus the Cathedral precincts), Grange and Lidsing. The union was governed by an elected Board of 14 Guardians, chosen by local ratepayers (with wealthier property-owners casting multiple votes).[104] The parish of Strood (across the River Medway from Chatham) formed part of a separate Poor Law Union (North Aylesford, later renamed Strood) rather than Medway Union. North Aylesford Union was created in 1835 with its own elected Guardians, and in 1837 it opened a new union workhouse on Gun Lane at Strood.[105]

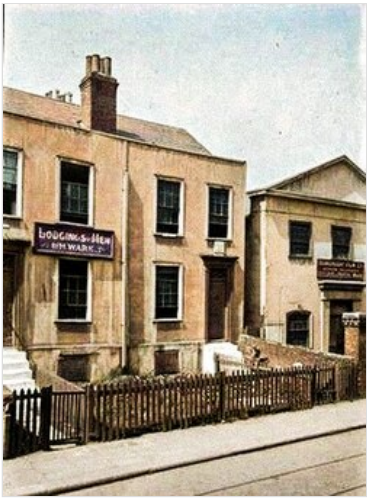
Left: All Saints Hospital (formerly Magpie Hall Road workhouse) administration block and wards, Chatham, mid-20th century; Right: Entrance and turreted administration building of All Saints Hospital, Chatham, circa 1980s–1990s

The Medway Board of Guardians was responsible for collecting local rates and providing relief to the needy of the union. It ran the union workhouse and employed officers (clerk, medical officer, etc.) to administer the relief system. Over time the strict "workhouse test" of the 1834 system was somewhat relaxed in practice: people in genuine hardship could receive some assistance at home during economic downturns. By the late 19th century the Guardians also expanded their welfare services – for example, in 1903 they established children's cottage homes in Chatham to house orphaned and destitute youngsters. In 1859 the Medway Union opened a new purpose-built workhouse on Magpie Hall Road in Chatham. This large brick complex was designed to accommodate about 650 inmates and included a hospital and segregated wards. When it opened in November 1859, the old Chatham and Rochester parish houses were closed and sold off. In later years the Chatham workhouse became the Medway/County Hospital (later All Saints Hospital) until its closure in 1999.[104]

From 1863 Rochester's St Bartholomew's Hospital maintained a 40-bed "lock" ward for women with venereal disease (mainly prostitutes). By March 1870 all such cases were transferred to a new lock hospital near Chatham. These provisions (made under the Contagious Diseases Acts) relieved the Guardians of the cost of treating those cases for about two decades. When the Acts were suspended in 1883 the Medway Guardians again had to admit and treat infected paupers in their own workhouse.[106]

In 1930 the Poor Law Union system (and thus the Medway Board of Guardians) was abolished.[107] Thereafter the former union workhouse passed into health service use; the Chatham workhouse became Medway/County/All Saints Hospital until it closed in 1999.[104] (Records of the Medway Poor Law Union and its Board of Guardians are held at the Medway Archives Centre for research.)

Charles Dickens


The former Dickens house at The Brook

The author Charles Dickens spent his early childhood in Chatham,[108] and his parents lived at 18 The Brook (officially 18 St. Mary's Place) in 1821–1823.[109] Dickens later recalled that time; his family's modest six-room house sat next to a chapel on The Brook, and from its upper windows he could see the church and yards "precisely as described" in his story *A Child's Dream of a Star*. Dickens himself called Chatham "my boyhood's home" and remembered "impressions…received" there in his youth.[110]

In summary, *The Brook, Chatham* was infamous in the Victorian era as a red-light district serving the dockyard and garrison. Historical sources confirm that it was densely packed with beer-houses and brothels, drawn in by the large transient population of sailors, soldiers and labourers.[89][85] Enforcement of the Contagious Diseases Acts and later slum-clearance measures both reflected and reinforced its reputation. By the end of the 19th century the oldest parts of The Brook were razed in efforts to eliminate its "immoral and criminal" character.[83] Modern historians and local memoirists alike, emphasize that this small street embodied the darker side of Chatham's Victorian boom – a legacy even Charles Dickens would have recognized in his depictions of military Chatham's bustle and vice.[85][86]

Notable buildings and infrastructure

Post-medieval tide mill

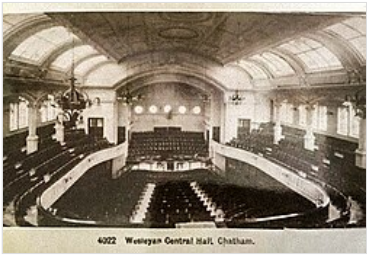
A large tidal mill once occupied the northern end of The Brook, exploiting the Holborne Brook's confluence with the River Medway.[111] Documentary evidence shows a mill pond "certainly existed by 1633" at this location, and a watermill stood on its northern bank.[112][113] The mill worked on the fall of the tide: a sluice gate allowed river water to fill the pond at high tide, and the outgoing flow through the sluice drove the mill wheel as the tide ebbed.[114] This arrangement—common in Kentish tidal mills—enabled grain milling independent of river navigation. The Ordnance Office acquired the mill and pond in the early 18th century to reclaim land for the expanding Dockyard complex.[115] By the mid-18th century the area was progressively filled in as Chatham's New Gun Wharf, a naval ordnance depot first laid out in the 1750s.[115] In effect the tide mill and pond were replaced by the new wharf. Only later storehouse buildings (such as the Deputy Storekeeper's House, c. 1811–21) survive from the New Gun Wharf phase.[115] No physical trace remains of the mill itself, but 17th–18th-century plans and decennial returns document its presence and dimensions on the north bank of the Brook.[115]

Wesleyan Methodist Chapel

The **Wesleyan Methodist chapel**,[116] also referred to as the Providence Chapel,[117] was established on The Brook in the early 19th century to serve the local nonconformist community.[118] Providence had been erected in 1795, and could accommodate 500 worshippers; it stood next door to No 18 St Mary's Place, the second but short-lived residence in Chatham of the Dickens family.[119] Kent's Historic Environment Record lists a "Weslyan Chapel, The Brook, c.1810–1920, demolished 1960." The chapel stood immediately adjacent to what is now known as Dickens House (18 St Mary's Place).[120] Like many Wesleyan chapels of the period, it was a plain rectangular brick or stone building with a gabled roof and simple arched windows; surviving maps show it amid dense housing of The Brook. The congregation would have formed part of the rapidly expanding Wesleyan Methodist movement in Kent, established by the late 18th century, offering evangelical and social outreach to the town's working-class population. The chapel is recorded on Ordnance Survey maps from 1897 to 1923. It apparently fell out of use after World War I; the building later served as a Salvation Army hall, and was ultimately demolished in 1960.[121]

Chatham Town Hall

The Renaissance-style Chatham Town Hall (completed 1899–1900) stands on The Brook at the junction with Dock Road. It was built of limestone[122] and opened on 23 January 1900 by Lord Rosebery as a municipal building.[123] It later became The Brook Theatre.[124]



Historical photograph showing the interior of Chatham Wesleyan Methodist Chapel

Old Brook Pumping Station

Located on Solomon's Road, the Old Brook Pumping Station[125] was completed in 1929 as part of Chatham's new sewerage scheme. It housed pumps to raise sewage from the Brook valley into the rising main toward Motney Hill treatment works. The building (a brick edifice of 1920s industrial design) is now a preserved heritage site – it is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and operates as a museum of Victorian and early 20th-century sewage technology.

Chatham Police Station

The former Chatham Police Station[126] (with address The Brook, ME4) sits near the junction with Dock Road.[127][128] Chatham Police Station was a police station of the Kent County Constabulary (later Kent Police)[129][130] located on The Brook, Chatham, Kent, England.[131] It served the Chatham area (a major naval dockyard and garrison town)[132] throughout much of the 20th century and into the early 2000s. The station is recorded in contemporary accounts as still operational in 2002–2011,[133] but was closed in the mid-2000s after Kent Police consolidated town policing into a single Medway station at Gillingham.[134] Chatham Police Station lay opposite the Medway Magistrates' Court.[135] The Kent Police asset register (2024) still lists "Chatham Police Station, The Brook, Chatham" among its properties but no policing functions occur there today.

Chatham Police Station (April 2014)

Bernard's Corner

Bernard's Corner, the junction of Military Road (A231) and The Brook (B2003), circa 1950s–1960s

Bernard's Corner was the historic name for the sharp junction of Military Road (A231) and The Brook (B2003) in Chatham, Kent.[136][137] It took its name from C. H. Bernard & Sons Ltd., a well-known Royal Navy and Army outfitters, which occupied the corner premises from at least the mid-20th century. Charles Firth Bernard founded the business in Harwich in 1897, earning the royal warrant for naval tailoring early on.[138] Over the decades the firm expanded to multiple naval ports; by the 1950s–60s it advertised a network of branches ("34 branches" nation-wide) to supply uniforms and servicemen's clothing.[139] Chatham is explicitly listed among Bernard's branches in 1973, confirming its long-standing presence at this site.[140] In addition to Bernard's, a Cooper's haberdashery occupied part of the same ground-floor unit. Cooper's was a local sewing and drapery shop (focused on haberdashery and textiles), known anecdotally to have coexisted with Bernard's during the 1950s–60s, though precise opening and closing dates are not documented.

C. H. Bernard & Sons (Naval Outfitters)

C. H. Bernard & Sons of Harwich was a prominent naval outfitter. Its Chatham branch, at Bernard's Corner, catered to dockyard sailors and army personnel ashore. Bernard's shops were typically outfitted with large display windows and uniform samples; they stocked service dress, walking-out clothes and accessory items (caps, swords, medals, etc.). Contemporary advertisements billed the firm as offering a "complete service for uniform and civilian clothing".[141] The Chatham store would have provided tailoring services and ready-to-wear uniforms. Bernard's held a Royal Warrant and marketed itself as the top quality supplier of naval uniforms (e.g. to Prince George's sons).[138] By the 1960s it was part of the Interport Naval Traders' Association, reflecting its significance. Although details of the Chatham branch's interior are scarce, surviving trade publicity shows Bernard's trade card: it noted branches in all major naval ports (including Chatham)[142] and offered convenient credit (e.g. Naval Allotment accounts) for service families. This suggests the shop had a formal counter/shopfront layout typical of mid-century outfitters (with uniforms on mannequins or hanging racks and tailors' workrooms behind).

Bernard's Corner at the junction of Military Road (A231) and The Brook (B2003), seen from above, circa 1950s–1960s

W. Cooper (Harwich) Ltd

W. Cooper (Harwich) Ltd was a co-tenant on Bernard's Corner.[143] It appears to have been a small, family-run sewing and furnishings shop occupying part of the same single-storey frontage as Bernard's. Street directories and personal recollections from the 1950s–60s list a Cooper's shop at this end of Military Road, but archival records (e.g. old newspapers or directories) mention it only sporadically. Available evidence indicates Cooper's was active through the 1950s and 1960s, serving local civilian needs. Like neighbouring Bernard's

and other Military Road shops, Cooper's was swept away by Chatham's redevelopment in the early 1970s. (By 1973, Bernard's and most other stores on Military Road had closed or relocated due to the new Pentagon Shopping Centre,[144] and Cooper's would have closed in the same period.)

Building and Layout

The Brook, Chatham in the 1950s, prior to the Pentagon redevelopment, with Bernard's on the corner

The Bernard's Corner premises were a purpose-built retail block at the sharp angle of The Brook and Military Road. Contemporary street photographs (mid-20th century) show a two-unit frontage with large glass windows under a continuous awning. Bernard's signage ("Bernard's Naval & Military Outfitters") would have adorned the façade facing both streets. Cooper's sign was visible on the adjacent part of the shopfront. Internally, the ground floor was divided between the two shops; Bernard's likely included a tailoring counter, display area, and back-room cutting tables (similar to its Harwich factory layout,[138] but on a smaller scale). The corner location meant both businesses benefited from high visibility and foot traffic from Brompton and Chatham's centre.

Pentagon Shopping Centre

The Brook, Chatham – cleared c. 1970 for the Pentagon

Built in the early 1970s, the Pentagon Shopping Centre occupies a large site on the east side of The Brook. Its construction cleared several old streets (*George Street, Nelson Road, Fair Row, Solomon's Road, Avondale Terrace*) that had contained housing and shops.[29]

One notable example is W. & J. Mackay & Co. Ltd. (*later called Mackays of Chatham*),[145][146] who were forced to vacate and have their Fair Row premises demolished to make way for the new complex. Shortly thereafter, the company relocated its book-printing operations approximately two miles south to a newly built facility in Lordswood, Chatham, where it still operates today.[147]

The "Pentagon" (so named for its five-sided central court) opened in 1975[148] as part of a redevelopment of Chatham town centre.[149] It includes the adjoining Brook multi-storey car park and the (now mostly unused) Mountbatten House office block. A former internal bus station in the Pentagon (accessible via ramps) was replaced in 2011 by the new Chatham Waterfront Bus Station; local buses (e.g. routes 8 and 145/146) now use the waterfront interchange rather than the old Pentagon station.

Mackays of Chatham, Fair Row premises

Crown House

Crown House (25 March 2025)

Crown House, located at 55–59 The Brook in Chatham, Kent (ME4 4LQ),[150] is a mid-20th-century office block on The Brook. It replaced earlier older buildings (and an open canal) along the west side of The Brook. It is a Department for Work and Pensions–owned facility that currently houses civil service and DWP staff[151] and operates as a Jobcentre Plus office for the Medway area.[152] Crown House provides employment support, processes benefit claims, and conducts mandatory interviews to assess eligibility and support jobseekers. In 2017, the DWP published a report announcing that it would retain the Crown House building—referred to in the report as part of its estate.[153]

Chatham Ragged School

Chatham Ragged School (26 January 2014)

The Chatham Ragged School on King Street, Chatham, Kent, is a two-storey yellow stock brick building with red brick dressings, built in 1858 by John Young to provide free education to poor children under the Victorian ragged-school movement; it retains its original "Ragged School" plaque and was designated Grade II listed on 21 April 2020.

Tesco Superstore (The Brook, Chatham)

The site at The Brook in Chatham, once home to small mid-20th-century shops, was cleared in the late 1970s to make way for a new Tesco Superstore, which opened in March 1982 at a cost of £8 million and created over 450 jobs. The two-storey store with a rooftop car park anchored Chatham's town centre for more than 30 years but declined in the 2000s, becoming rundown and underused before closing in April 2015 as one of Tesco's loss-making branches. After its closure, part of the building was briefly occupied by Go Outdoors (2016–2020), while the rest stood vacant. The adjoining Market Hall and car park also fell into disuse, with the car park closing in 2022. In October 2022 Medway Council sold the site to developer Arpenteur Nightingale, which proposed a major mixed-use redevelopment including around 319 flats, ground-floor commercial units, and a new public plaza. Demolition of the old Tesco and Market Hall buildings began in early 2025, and in June 2025 Medway Council approved the redevelopment plans to regenerate the town centre.

A period photograph (c. 1965) of the four-storey Kent Art Printers Limited building at 2A The Brook, Chatham, showing the prominent "Kent Art Printers Ltd" signage on the upper façades.

Elliott Automation Building (2A The Brook)

The site at **2A The Brook, Chatham**, was originally occupied by Kent Art Printers Limited (KAP),[154] a printing firm founded in 1934. Companies House records describe KAP's premises as "the chapel printing works, The Brook, Chatham".[155] By the mid-1960s KAP operated from a four-story commercial building on The Brook (often known as "Medway House")[156] with *Kent Art Printers Ltd* signage on its facade. This period view shows the corner block labelled with Kent Art Printers on the upper stories.[154]

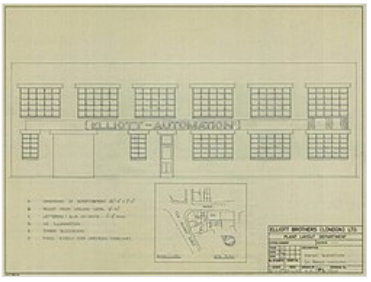
Kent Art Printers

Kent Art Printers Ltd was registered on 16 June 1934,[157][158] and by 18 February 1938 had established its printing works on The Brook in Chatham.[159] Through the 1950s and early 1960s, KAP's address was listed as "Medway House, The Brook" in company directories. In Cakebread Robey's 1963 catalogue for builders' merchants, the Chatham branch address is given as "Medway House, Brook".[160] This confirms that the large corner building at The Brook (4–5 storeys high) was known as Medway House and housed Kent Art Printers Ltd.

By the mid-1960s the ground floor of this building contained street-front shops, while the upper floors held KAP's printing offices and workshops. Architecturally, the block was a typical post-war commercial structure: a flat-roofed brick-and-concrete facade with broad rectangular windows in each story and a horizontal sign band above the top floor. (A 1967 architectural drawing of the front elevation exists showing plans for a sign reading "Elliott Automation," indicating how the exterior would be re-lettered after KAP's occupancy.)[161]

Elliott Automation occupancy (c. 1967–1968)

Around 1967–1968 the Kent Art Printers works was taken over by Elliott Automation Ltd (an avionics and industrial control company). In 1967 Elliott-Automation had entered into a friendly takeover by English Electric, and soon after by General Electric Company. According to company histories, Elliott-Automation became part of these larger groups during 1967–68, and Sir Leon Bagrit of Elliott joined the English Electric board that summer. In practice, this meant that the Chatham site formerly used by KAP was repurposed for Elliott's use. The planned change was even reflected in a 1967 elevation drawing: it shows new "Elliott Automation" lettering to be fixed on the front of the building, implying the printers' works was being converted for Elliott's operations.



1967 front-elevation photograph of the four-storey Kent Art Printers Limited building at 2A The Brook, Chatham, showing the façade, window pattern, and original signage.

Once Elliott moved in (circa 1968), the building was known locally as the Elliott Automation office/works. The distinctive company logo and name would have been added to the facade. Signage plans from 1967 (available in archives) label the building's front "Elliott Automation." (By late 1968 the Elliott name was still in use; a Flight International directory from September 1969 lists Marconi-Elliott Avionic Systems Ltd with its headquarters at "Airport Works, Rochester, Kent," reflecting that by then Elliott's avionics operations had been rebranded under GEC-Marconi.)

Company name changes (1968–1969)

During 1968–69 the parent companies underwent major reorganizations. In late 1968 GEC merged with English Electric and restructured the combined electronics businesses. The various Elliott-Automation electronics divisions were folded into GEC-Elliott-Automation (for industrial automation) and GEC-Marconi Electronics (for avionics). In this realignment, Elliott Automation Ltd itself was renamed and repositioned: the Rochester avionics arm became Marconi-Elliott Avionic Systems Ltd (by early 1969), while the overall automation/control division fell under GEC-Elliott. A contemporary Flight International organization chart (Sept 1969) shows "Marconi-Elliott Avionic Systems Ltd" headquartered at the Rochester Airport works, and historical accounts confirm that the Elliott subsidiaries were renamed Marconi-Elliott Avionics by 1969. (Elliott Automation Ltd eventually formally changed its name to GEC-Elliott Automation on 1 December 1970, though in practice most Elliott signage in Chatham was already under the GEC-Marconi rubric by 1969.)

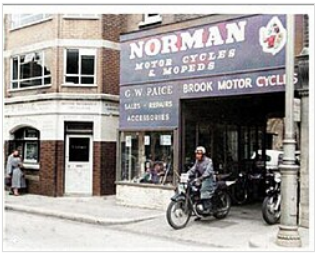
Architecture and neighbouring buildings

The Elliott Automation building at 2A The Brook was a straightforward mid-20th-century brick block. Photographs show it as a rectangular 4-story structure with a flat roof, vertical stone piers between bays, and wide horizontal windows on each floor. Above the top-floor windows was a projecting fascia for company signage. By 1968 the fascia bore "Kent Art Printers" (for KAP) but plans were drawn to replace this with "Elliott Automation."

On the north corner (the four-storey block), the block is identified as "Medway House, Brook" in period documents. Cakebread Robey & Co. – a London-based builders' merchants[162] – operated a branch at this address (Medway House, The Brook) in the early 1960.[160] In other words, the large corner building not only hosted Kent Art Printers but was also the Cakebread Robey branch in Chatham (roof signage and company directories of 1963 list "Medway House, Brook" under Chatham).[160] By the late 1960s, the Cakebread Robey name on the neighboring pitched-roof building (to the east) had changed: the single-story shop beside Elliott's premises carried a large rooftop sign "Louis G. Ford," indicating the arrival of Louis G. Ford Ltd (another local builders' merchant) in that storefront.

On the photo above, the Elliott (ex-KAP) building is on the left; to its right is a low "Kent Pressings" showroom; further right is the peaked-roof shop with the word "CAKEBREAD ROBEY & CO LTD" painted on the gable (this would soon be replaced by Louis G. Ford's signage).

Embankment-side businesses: Along the south side of The Brook (by the town's western embankment and old defensive wall), there were various small workshops, garages and yards in the mid-20th century. For example, in the 1950s–60s there were local garages and motor-trade businesses (motorcycle dealers such as Brook Motorcycles[163] and Norman Motorcycles, an Auto Sport Centre garage, military outfitters like Bernard's Naval & Military Outfitters, and the Vokes taxi company) on or near The Brook, as well as older premises (shoe repairers, a foundry trade yard, and a scrap yard at Finnis Yard). These have mostly closed or moved; the street now has more modern commercial units.



Norman & The Brook Motorcycles, Chatham, historical photograph showing early 20th-century motorcycles.

Environment

Air quality and monitoring

In 2007, as part of Medway Council's NO_2 diffusion tube network changes, following the 2006 Updating and Screening Assessment (USA), a passive monitoring station was installed along The Brook in Chatham. This kerbside site, positioned at the nearest residential façade, contributes to ongoing measurements of roadside nitrogen dioxide levels.[164]

Historic pubs and shops on the Brook

In the 18th–20th centuries the length of The Brook was lined with many taverns and businesses. Notable examples included the White Swan (at the south end near Cage Lane)[165][166] and its adjoining *White Swan Tap* (with a bowling green behind),[167] the Royal Sovereign (on The Brook itself, closed in 1977 during the Pentagon redevelopment,[168] and the Duke of Cambridge (on Fair Row at the Brook's north end).[169] Other past public houses on The Brook included the Three Cups (corner of Queen Street), the Kings Head, the Bell, Sir Colin Campbell, Armoury/Brighton Tavern, also called Army & Navy, the Churchill, later called Brook Bark, and the Lord Nelson. These catered to dockworkers, soldiers and townspeople. Many closed by the late 20th century, though some names survive locally (e.g. The Brook Bar name on Churchills). Other Brook-area businesses over time included motor-cycle shops (Brook Motorcycles, Norman Motorcycles), an Auto Sport Centre garage, and outfitters like Bernard's Naval & Military Outfitters.[170] In addition, Queensway Furniture occupied a corner site (having replaced older shops) and Johnnie's Café was a longstanding snack bar on The Brook.

Pubs and taverns along the Brook

Army & Navy

7 The Brook (ME4 4LA),[171] locally and commercially known as **Army & Navy**,[172] also known as the **Army and Navy Hotel**,[173][174] is a historic former licensed public house on Whiffens Avenue at its junction with The Brook in Chatham, Kent. It is located next to The Brook Theatre.[175] The building has operated under various names. In the mid-19th century it was recorded as the Army and Navy Hotel (the Army & Navy Hotel is documented as a meeting place in 1852).[176] During the 20th century it was later known as the Brook Bar, and then rebranded as Churchills in its final years. The pub remained in operation until 2016.[177] One contemporary account notes that the pub was one of "Medway's livelier, more interesting and historic venues" also noting they were hosting "Sunday bands with karaoke and nightclub in the cellar."[178]

Number 7, The Brook—formerly operating as Churchills—stands on the left, while on the right the very same building has been converted entirely into residences, its signage now removed.

A significant incident occurred on 22 September 2016 when a large brawl broke out outside the pub. One man was stabbed and another critically injured.[179] Police immediately requested a premises licence review. The Medway Licensing Panel held an expedited hearing and on 17 October 2016 revoked the licence for Churchills, citing poor management... history of incidents... and the severity of the incident.[180] This effectively closed the pub. By May 2018, reports indicated that the bar fittings were being stripped out as the building was set to be converted into residential flats,[181] following the approval of a change of use planning application submitted the previous year.[182]

Licensees

Historic records of individual licensees for 7 The Brook are sparse. Newspaper and registry sources indicate at least one specific licensee by name: in 1930, Percy Ansell was serving as the licensee of the Army & Navy pub at this location.[183] (Percy Ansell was also a Chatham town councillor[184] and later mayor in 1935.)[185] Earlier and later licensee names are not fully documented in available online sources. In its final years the premises operated as the Brook Bar and then Churchills under licence by various operators until 2016.

King William IV

The King William IV, alternatively known as **William The Fourth**, and affectionately known by locals as '"King Billy", was a significant public house located at 33 The Brook in Chatham, Kent. This establishment served as a central gathering place for the community for over a century, with records indicating its operation from at least 1858 until its closure in 1962.[186] Today, the original pub building has been completely removed, and the site has undergone a substantial transformation, now housing a modern commercial enterprise, Medway Transmission.

Proximity to civic landmarks

The pub was conveniently located approximately 200 yards from Chatham Town Hall. Chatham Town Hall, a Renaissance-style municipal building completed between 1899 and 1900, is also situated on The Brook.[186] This historic civic building later transitioned into The Brook Theatre, becoming a notable cultural venue in the town. The close proximity to such a significant public building suggests the pub's integration into the town's central activities and daily life.

Operational history and ownership

The King William IV pub in Chatham, fully intact with its historic signage on the left, while on the right the very same building lies mid-demolition, its facade stripped and rubble piled where its walls once stood.

According to the Licensing Records of 1872, the King William IV premises held a Beer License. This type of license permitted the sale of beer, distinguishing it from a full publican's license that would also include spirits and wine. In 1872, the pub was owned by Mary Elizabeth Lock Beveridge of Ramsgate. The King William IV pub ceased operations and closed its doors in 1962. At this time, The Brook area itself was undergoing significant urban renewal, with slum clearance having occurred by 1930 and further redevelopment planned.[186]

Licensees and residents

From 1858 to 1930, the premises was continually occupied by successive publicans and beer retailers. William James Pidgeon first appears in Melville's Directory of 1858 and remains listed through the Post Office Directory of 1862. By 1872, James Brown is recorded in the licensing registers. In the 1881 Census, Benjamin Gale, a 46-year-old widower, is enumerated as beer retailer, living on-site with his three children and five lodgers; Kelly's Directory of 1882 confirms his tenure. The 1891 Census names Donald Shaw (30) as publican, residing with his wife Anne E., their young son, his brother Malcolm, brother-in-law Vernon W. Gale and five lodgers of various trades. In the 1911 Census, John Joseph Brown (46) is listed as beer retailer, living with his wife Caroline, their children Alice Matilda, Joseph Percy and John William, and his widowed mother-in-law; both Kelly's Directory of 1913 and the Post Office Directory of 1930 continue to record "Jn Joseph Brown." By 1938, the Post Office Directory names Mrs Caroline Brook as licensee, marking the latest known occupant.[186][187]

The Three Cups

The Three Cups was located at 129 The Brook, Chatham, Kent.[188] It was situated on one side of Queen Street,[189] positioned at the foot of the Great Lines.[190]

Early mentions and licensing

The Three Cups possesses a long and documented history, with its earliest recorded licensee, Ann French, noted in 1793.[191] The Universal British Directory of Trade from the same year also confirms the pub's existence. Subsequent historical directories, including Pigot's Directory (1828–29, 1832-33-34) and Wright's Topography (1838),[192] further document its continuous operation. The Licensing Records of 1872 explicitly indicate that the premises held a Full License, signifying its established status as a public house.[193]

Ownership and management

In 1872, The Three Cups was under the ownership of Edward Winch of Chatham.[194] Edward Winch was a prominent figure within Chatham's brewing industry. For context, his nearby brewery on the High Street, which had a history of operation under the Best family dating back to at least 1666, was leased by Winch in 1851 and subsequently acquired by him in 1894. In 1899, Winch's business, E. Winch & Sons Ltd., merged with Style & Co of Maidstone, forming Style and Winch Limited. This amalgamation led to the cessation of operations at the Chatham Brewery.[195]

Key events and incidents

The pub's history is marked by various events recorded in local newspapers, providing glimpses into its daily life and community role:

- **Theft (1878):** On 11 February 1878, a customer named James Andrews was indicted for stealing a pewter quart pot, which was the property of Alfred Chidley. Chidley, identified as a publican of The Brook, Chatham, testified that he located the stolen pot at Mr. Spencelayh's shop, where Andrews had sold it for seven pence. Andrews was found guilty and sentenced to three months' hard labour.[196]

Architectural evolution and later occupants

The Three Cups building was originally a three-story structure.[197] At an unspecified point in its history, it was reduced to a one-story building. Following its life as a pub, the building later housed the "W.G. ADAMS & SONS" business, which provided "tippers, haulage, trucks and vans for hire".[198]

Other former pubs and taverns along The Brook

- **The Swan**: The Swan (often called the *White Swan*) stood at the south end of The Brook near Cage Lane, with a full-size bowling green behind. It was one of many Victorian-era taverns lining The Brook.
- **The Running Horse**: *The Running Horse* was a public house at the northern end of The Brook (around 73 The Brook). An 1864 directory describes it as "just before King Street" on the Brook.[199] The pub catered to dockyard and military workers. A 1919 sketch by A. Phipson shows the Running Horse still in operation that year.[200]
- **The Pelican**: The Pelican was located at 99 The Brook and is noted in late 19th-century pub lists, but no detailed history (owners, name changes, etc.)
- **Lord Nelson**: The Lord Nelson stood at 115 The Brook (opposite Willmott Street) by the 1860s.[201] Named for Admiral Nelson, it was one of the waterside taverns serving dockyard workers. It is listed in an 1864 directory.
- **The Earl of Chatham** was a public house at 141 The Brook (earlier records show it as number 135). Mid-19th-century directories list licensees living there: e.g. Mrs. Frances Williams (widow, beer retailer) in 1874,[202] followed by Charles Benster by 1891[203] and Alfred Waddell by 1901.[204] These records show a succession of family licensees but do not note the pub's later history or closing date.
- **King's Head**: The King's Head stood on The Brook just below King Street, as recorded in a contemporary 1864 guide.[205] It served local townsfolk and military men.
- **Royal Sovereign**: The Royal Sovereign was located at 151 The Brook. It remained open into the late 20th century. According to local history, it closed in 1977 when The Brook area was redeveloped (the Pentagon shopping centre was built and roads were widened.
- **The Bell**: The Bell was another 19th-century Brook tavern, listed just east of the King's Head in an 1864 directory.[206] It catered to the same clientele but, like many Brook pubs, no further records of its later years were found.
- **Saracen's Head**: The Saracen's Head was recorded at 179 The Brook (licensed from 1872). However, some accounts suggest it may never have opened for trade.
- **Duke of Cambridge**: The Duke of Cambridge pub was built by 1864 at the north end of Fair Row (facing The Brook). It is noted as "newly built" in an 1864 guide.
- **Victoria**: A pub named the Victoria once stood on The Brook.
- **Honest Lawyer**: The Honest Lawyer was another named pub on The Brook.
- **Blacksmith Arms**: The Blacksmith Arms is listed among the former pubs that operated at The Brook.

Shops and other businesses on The Brook

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, The Brook in Chatham was lined with small, family-run shops serving the local community. At number 15, Kate Hiscox operated a retail shop for at least two years (1890–91), though little else is known about her business or its exact offerings. Nearby at number 22, Daniel Gibbs was listed as a shopkeeper in the same years, but like Hiscox, he disappears from records by the early 1890s, suggesting his store closed or changed hands soon afterward.

Further along the street at number 40, Emily Annie Drago (often listed as "Annie Drago") ran a shop in 1890–91. Census records indicate she was part of a local family but, after marrying in 1898, she no longer appears as a merchant on The Brook; by 1910, her premises had likely been taken over by someone else. Just up the way at number 55, Henry Higgins kept a small shop during the same period, yet no trade notices or later directory entries survive, implying his business too was short-lived.

Number 110 housed a more specialized marine stores dealer, John Giles, who supplied equipment and supplies to ships—apt for a street close to Chatham Dockyard. His listing ends around 1900, indicating that the marine trade on The Brook did not persist into mid-century. At the corner of Union Street, number 125 was home to Joshua Driver & Son, who sold corn, seeds, hay, and straw. Joshua Driver died in 1898, and although his

son William later became a local mayor, the Driver family's shop no longer appears in directories by the 1910s and was eventually absorbed into newer buildings.

By 1910 a brief entry at number 127 names Amos Alfred William as a shopkeeper—likely operating both a store and taking in lodgers—but no records exist before or after that listing. Finally, Robert D. Hobbs ran a shop at number 145 in 1890–91; after this, he is never mentioned again, and his premises were later redeveloped along with the rest of The Brook. By the mid-20th century, most of these Victorian-era buildings had been replaced or extensively altered, and during the 1970s redevelopment of Chatham's High Street and The Brook (which included construction of the Pentagon shopping centre), very little of the original row-fronted shops remained.

Major events

The June 1907 flood

On 1 June 1907, heavy rainfall caused severe flooding of The Brook and nearby streets in Chatham. Contemporary postcards documented cars stranded in deep water on The Brook, providing visual evidence of the flood's severity. This flooding was a clear demonstration of the old open brook's tendency to overflow, highlighting the limited natural drainage capacity of the area. The flood was significant enough to be captured in period photography and postcards, suggesting it was both memorable and dramatic for local residents.[207] The presence of automobiles stranded in the floodwaters indicates the flood reached substantial depths, sufficient to immobilize early motor vehicles of the era. The 1907 flood was not an isolated incident but part of a longer pattern of flooding that had affected The Brook area throughout the 19th century.[196] Historical records reveal multiple flooding episodes that preceded the famous 1907 event.

Pre-1907 flooding episodes

August 1846 flooding

Five years before the cholera outbreak, Chatham experienced significant flooding in August 1846. After an extreme weather event on 1 August, another severe storm struck Chatham particularly hard on 5 August 18464. Heavy rainfall lasted above an hour, and the principal street in Chatham was flooded owing to water flowing down from the hills.[208]

The 1863 Chatham flood

On 20 June 1863, Chatham experienced another significant flooding event. In a short time, the steep streets were converted into perfect streams, and at the bottom of these declivities, cellars were flooded.[209] This event demonstrates the recurring problem of surface water runoff from the elevated areas surrounding The Brook.

The 1870 Chatham flood

These historical accounts reveal that flooding at The Brook and surrounding Chatham areas was a recurring problem throughout the Victorian era. The consistent pattern involved heavy rainfall overwhelming the area's limited drainage capacity, with water flowing down from the surrounding hills and causing street-level flooding and cellar inundation. The flooding was particularly problematic because The Brook followed the course of the historically open Old Bourne River.[210]

- World War II Bombing: Chatham's dockyard and town centre were heavily bombed in WWII. Bomb damage left several vacant sites around The Brook (some land was cleared instead of rebuilt after the war). Nearby Ordnance Street was devastated in 1940, and the rubble eventually reshaped surrounding streets. During the war the proximity of the Chatham naval base meant military patrols often passed along The Brook and Dock Road area, keeping watch for damage or unexploded bombs.

Transport

Buses

Arriva Kent & Surrey Alexander Dennis Enviro200 MMC on Route 177 to Walderslade, on The Brook.

The Brook is served by local bus routes in Chatham. Two stops on The Brook – "Chatham, opposite The Brook Iceland" (near the Iceland supermarket)[211] and "Chatham, opposite Upbury Way" (High Street near the former Gala Bingo)[212] – are served by a range of Arriva and Nu-Venture services. For example, Nu-Venture routes 120 and 124 (to/from Rainham) and Arriva routes 132/132A, 164, 175, 176 and 177 (connecting Chatham with Hempstead Valley, Gillingham and Walderslade) stop at The Brook Iceland.[213] Similarly, at Upbury Way passengers can board Arriva routes 132, 164, 166, 175, 176, 177 and Nu-Venture routes 169/179.[212] (These services all call at Chatham Waterfront bus station on Globe Lane as well.) By contrast, Arriva routes 101 (Chatham–Maidstone) and 182 (Chatham–Twydall) serve Chatham Waterfront Bus Station but do not stop directly at The Brook.[214] (Chatham Waterfront station is at the north end of The Brook area, roughly a 5–10-minute walk from The Brook's main commercial stretch.)

Rail

Chatham railway station facing from Ordnance Terrace towards Railway Street.

Chatham railway station (on Railway Street) is the nearest train station, about 0.6 miles from The Brook.[215] It has two platforms (northbound and southbound) and is managed by Southeastern; most trains serving Chatham are operated by Southeastern (with a minority of services by Govia Thameslink). Northbound (London-bound) services from Chatham run via Rochester and Bromley to London Victoria, and via Gravesend on High Speed 1 to London St Pancras International; Thameslink also provides through trains to Luton via Greenwich. Additional peak-time trains run to London Cannon Street and Charing Cross (via Sidcup). Southbound services run into coastal Kent, via Faversham and Canterbury East, serving destinations such as Ramsgate (via Canterbury) and Dover Priory, with intermediate stops including Canterbury East, Faversham, Whitstable, Herne Bay, etc.

Carriageway resurfacing

Medway Council's planned maintenance programme appoints carriageway resurfacing schemes on the basis of annual condition surveys and available funding. As part of the 2025–26 works, the section of The Brook in the Chatham Central and Brompton ward—specifically the stretch in front of the car park and taxi rank—was resurfaced, with works completed on 6 May 2025.[216]

Red routes

Red routes are stretches of road marked by double red lines, where stopping, parking, loading or unloading is prohibited at all times to maintain traffic flow and safety. The Brook between The Brook Theatre, Whiffen's Avenue and the junction of New Road (including Union Street) was designated a red route[217] in May 2024 under an £805,000 traffic management scheme, which replaced previous double yellow lines and installed monitoring cameras.[218]

Pedestrian crossings

The Brook carries several pedestrian crossings that link it to nearby shopping areas, civic buildings and transport hubs. Some crossings are signal-controlled (with traffic lights and push-button signals) while others are uncontrolled zebra crossings. They generally have raised central refuges and tactile paving at the kerb edges to assist visually impaired users – in UK practice "blister" tactile surfaces are used at crossings (red for controlled crossings, buff for uncontrolled).[219] For example, recent redevelopment work ("The Paddock" public space between Chatham Waterfront bus station and the Pentagon Shopping Centre) included new pathways connecting two pedestrian crossings between the bus station and The Brook road.

Medway Council maintains The Brook's crossings as part of its highway programme. In the 2025–26 works the carriageway on The Brook (fronting the multi-storey car park) was fully resurfaced (work completed 6 May 2025).[216] The Council's Chatham town-centre plans also emphasise improved pedestrian links (e.g. adding crossings and wider walkways).[220] These measures, along with standard crossing features (tactile paving, refuge islands and guardrails where needed), help provide safer pedestrian access across The Brook.

Crime

In recent years The Brook has been the scene of various violent and drug-related incidents. For example, in 2008 police investigated a fight there in which a 35-year-old man was struck by a car and seriously injured.[221] Similarly, in November 2017 one local report described the multi-storey car park at The Brook as being used by drug addicts, with needles, blood and even human waste frequently found by visitors.[222] In general the area has gained a reputation as a hub for drug dealing: in 2018 authorities noted that a hire car stopped "in The Brook, Chatham" was there in an area "well known" for Class A drug dealing.[223]

Notable incidents

Several specific crimes at The Brook have been reported. In September 2016 a large street brawl broke out near the Churchill's pub at The Brook and Whiffen's Avenue. Emergency services found one 28-year-old man stabbed in the leg and another, aged 69, critically injured.[224] Police later suspended the pub's licence after noting the venue's "history of incidents" and association with the stabbing. The suspects (five people) were arrested on charges including assault and public order offenses.

In 2018–2019 The Brook area (specifically the Multi-Storey Car Park off The Brook, mainly used for the Pentagon) was the scene of serious sexual assaults. In one case a 15-year-old girl was raped in a stairwell by a gang member – the crime took place in the centre's car park off The Brook.[225] A second case involved a teenager filming a sexual assault in the same car park stairwell.[226] In that latter case, the staircase and rear car park entrance "off The Brook" were explicitly mentioned by police and in media captions.

Other crimes have included burglary and robbery. In October 2020 a man admitted to multiple thefts including a burglary of a premises on The Brook.[227] More recently, in March 2023 a 16-year-old boy was robbed at knife-point near the junction of Chatham High Street and The Brook; three attackers took his phone and cash. (Notably, this robbery occurred near the junction with The Brook.)[228]

The Brook Multi-Storey car park where the incidents took place.[225][226]

Local crime data underscore that The Brook area sees frequent offenses of many kinds. For example, official neighbourhood crime reports for April 2025 list 98 "Violence and sexual offences" and 28 shoplifting incidents within half a mile of The Brook.[229] That same month saw 59 incidents of anti-social behaviour recorded in the area. These statistics show a mix of Violent crimes, thefts and disorder offences affecting the Brook precinct. Police have described this area as "well known" for drug dealing. In April 2025, 98 violence/sexual and 28 shoplifting crimes were recorded near The Brook.[229] Over the past two decades these incidents – from assaults to drug offenses – have contributed to concerns about crime at The Brook. While the area continues to serve shoppers and visitors, local police and council reports have repeatedly cited The Brook as a location linked to crime problems.[223]

Red Cat Lane

Red Cat Lane was a narrow back-street in Chatham, running south from Dock Road toward the river, immediately north of St Mary's Church.[231] For much of the 18th century it contained several dwellings (including the parish rectory) and two public houses – the Queen's Head at its corner with Dock Road, and the Red Cat – which catered to dockyard workers. Over time, Red Cat Lane came to be seen as part of Chatham's most notorious slum district, much like the nearby Brook area.[232]

In the 19th century Red Cat Lane's reputation remained disreputable.[233] Contemporary accounts emphasize its taverns and crowded alleys as centres of gambling and other illicit entertainments. The lane's many pubs and back-courts made it notorious as a hotspot of vice and crime.[232]

This shady character came to an end as naval barracks expanded. In the 1790s nearly all of Red Cat Lane's buildings were cleared for an extension of the Royal Marines Barracks.[232] Further barracks expansions in the mid-19th century required the demolition of the remaining lanes and alleys (along with nearby Holborn Lane)[234] to make way for new military housing. By the late 19th century the old Red Cat Lane had vanished under the expanded barracks.[235]

The Women's Royal Naval Service recruits outside the newly built Royal Marines Barracks in Chatham—erected on the former Red Cat Lane slum site (1917–1918)[230]

Batchelor Street

Batchelor Street (formerly Fullalove or Full O' Love Alley)[236][237] is a short pedestrian street located off The Brook.[238][239] Its history is documented in town maps, directories and archives. In the 19th century it formed a narrow cobbled lane off the High Street, lined with weather boarded cottages[240] (e.g. an 1898 photo, captioned "High Street Chatham (East). The sign on the left is to Fullalove Alley, now Batchelor Street".[241] Trade directories confirm the early name: for example, the *Kelly's Directory* of 1882 lists Robert Godsiff, Marine Store Dealer, Fullalove Alley.[242] This original name survives in archival captions.[243] County directories and maps show that Fullalove Alley was renamed Batchelor Street[244] around 1900–1902: a local history study notes "the area was redeveloped between 1900 and 1902 with Fullalove Alley becoming the current Batchelor Street". The first directory entries for Batchelor Street appear from about 1903 onward. The renaming was part of a wider re-numbering of Chatham High Street during redevelopment of that era.

Historical photograph of Batchelor Street, Chatham, formerly known as Fullalove or "Full O' Love" Alley, showing the street's early 20th-century appearance.

Kent County Council Weights and Measures Office

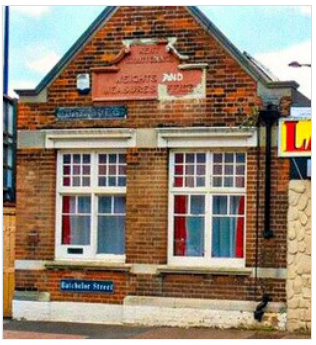
One prominent former building was the Kent County Council Weights & Measures Office at the corner of Batchelor Street and The Brook. This ornate stone-built office (two storeys plus attic, in Victorian civic style) was erected in the early 1900s as part of the High Street improvements; it was demolished in 2018 during redevelopment of the site. In its place a new six-storey mixed-use building is now rising on the Batchelor Street corner.[245]

History

This building is the former Kent County Council Weights and Measures Office, on the east side of Batchelor Street in Chatham, Kent.[246] Its red-brick façade, Victorian sash windows, and the "Kent County Council Weights and Measures Office" stone plaque identify it as the (now former) local administrative base for Trade Standards in the Chatham District (Inspector A C Fox) under Kent County Council during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[247][246]

Weights and Measures were a government body that ensured all measuring devices—like scales, beer glasses, and optics—were accurate and legal. Unchecked or inaccurate equipment couldn't be used and using them was illegal.

Origins



Batchelor Street was developed in the latter half of the 19th century as part of Chatham's urban expansion beyond the Royal Dockyard precincts. Around this time, local authorities across England established dedicated Weights and Measures Offices to enforce the Weights and Measures Acts, ensuring fair trade and accurate commerce. In Chatham District, the office on Batchelor Street served as the headquarters for the District Inspector (A C Fox by 1936),[247] who was responsible for verifying that all merchants' and market traders' scales, weights, and measuring devices conformed to statutory standards. These offices typically included a calibration room, secure storage for standard weights and measures, and office space for clerks and inspectors.[248]

20th century operations

Photograph of the former Kent County Council Weights and Measures Office at Batchelor Street.

Throughout the early 20th century the Chatham Weights and Measures Office remained in continuous use, adapting to successive Weights and Measures Acts (e.g., 1878, 1893, and 1963). Inspectors used the premises to test bulk liquid measures (such as petrol pumps), weighbridges, and retail scales, supporting both consumer protection and revenue collection. As trade regulations evolved—especially post-World War II—many district offices consolidated, and this Batchelor Street office was eventually decommissioned as a standalone calibration site. By the 1970s, routine calibration work had largely shifted to a central "Kent Scientific Services" laboratory (located elsewhere in Maidstone), and the Batchelor Street premises were vacated. The former building was demolished around 2018 and the site became designated as brownfield land in 2020.[249]

Batchelor Street has long contained mixed residential and commercial uses. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the street housed small shops and workshops serving the local neighbourhood and dockyard. One example is "Robert Godsiff, Marine Store Dealer" of Fullalove Alley in 1882 (suggesting a maritime-supply shop for dockyard workers). Through the 20th century many buildings on Batchelor Street were used as tradesmen's workshops, warehouses or small retail units. City directories from the 1950s–80s list various builders, plumbers, and light industrial businesses at Batchelor Street addresses. By the 2000s the east end of Batchelor Street had become largely back-of-block service areas: a mid-2010s planning report noted the former buildings on the Solomons Road side (rear of 247–253 High Street and 1–5 Batchelor Street) had been demolished and were in use as a car park. (That same report confirmed the site once held a commercial building, now replaced by flats and a new access road.) In recent years, 1 Batchelor Street (on the corner) has been occupied by a Halfords bicycle/motor accessories warehouse-style shop;[250][251] this replaced the earlier "Brook Garage" complex on the site.[252]

Social history

Batchelor Street's earliest residents were largely working-class families tied to the nearby naval dockyard and army barracks. Many inhabitants in the 19th century were labourers, craftsmen or tradesmen. For example, 1881 census references to Batchelor Street and nearby include dockyard workers and pensioners. The presence of a "marine store dealer" on the street in 1882 indicates close links to maritime trades.[253] The small, weatherboarded houses visible in period photos match typical workers' cottages of Brompton and the Dockyard lines. Although detailed census listings require archive research, local history suggests the street formed part of the "sea captain's ward" housing (St. Mary's or Brompton wards) where many dockyard employees lived. No notable gentry lived here; rather, Batchelor Street exemplified 19th-century dockyard-town streets of modest artisan homes.

Urban planning and redevelopment

From the 1960s onward Batchelor Street has been affected by Chatham town-centre schemes. In the late 1960s–70s, the construction of the Pentagon Shopping Centre and its adjacent roads (now "Solomon's Road" and the re-routed Brook road) reconfigured the area. Solomon's Road (an east–west service road linking the north side of High Street to the Pentagon Shopping Centre) was laid out at that time; Batchelor Street's northern end was tied into this new road (as shown by Medway planning maps noting the site abuts Solomon's Road to the north. In the early 2000s The Brook (the old stream route) was further widened as a major one-way road bordering the Great Lines Heritage Park. More recently, a design and access statement designated Batchelor Street's western block as "Opportunity Site G" for high-density redevelopments.[254] In practice this has prompted demolition and rebuilding: for example, a 2017 planning application and subsequent construction by Cook Associates replaced the old rear buildings with a new 6-storey residential block on the Batchelor/The Brook corners. Another scheme granted permission in 2017 built a new mixed-use building (ground-floor shops with flats above) on the Solomon's Road car park behind Batchelor Street.[255] Thus, from the 1970s to today Batchelor Street has transitioned from backstreets of industrial workshops[252] and cottages to a modern infill streetscape guided by the town centre regeneration.

Traffic regulation

Batchelor Street has been pedestrianised at its south end and subject to recent traffic controls. In July 2024 Medway Council confirmed that the High Street entrance from Batchelor Street is part of a "pedestrian zone". Access from Batchelor Street onto the High Street is officially restricted, as one of Medway's "Safer, Healthier Streets" moving-traffic schemes. This means the street is effectively car-free at its High Street end, improving safety for residents. (Delivery and disabled access is managed via Solomon's Road behind the street.) The ban was approved in the Council's Safer, Healthier Streets Tranche 2 report of mid-2024.[256]

Cultural and political events

In the spring of 1932, Sir Oswald Mosley's short-lived New Party[257] held an open-air political meeting on Batchelor Street. This rally – organized by the Medway Towns branch of the New Party – occurred amid high local unemployment and political turmoil.[258] Unemployment in Chatham had roughly doubled since 1929 (7,687 registered unemployed by November 1932), fueling social unrest.[259] Mosley, who had resigned from the Labour Party in early 1931 to launch the New Party, was moving toward fascist ideology.[260] (He had recently visited Mussolini in Italy and by April 1932[261] formally disbanded the New Party in name, keeping only its youth movement.) Local historians note that the May rally "illustrates" the New Party's overt turn to fascism in the Medway area. The meeting is often cited as a key moment in Chatham's interwar political history.

Oswald Mosley and Benito Mussolini (1936)

The Batchelor Street rally took place in May 1932 as an open-air New Party meeting. Contemporary accounts (recorded later by historians) describe a heavily symbolic event. Mussolini's Italian *Fascist Hymn* (likely *Giovinezza*) was played over loudspeakers, and members of the New Party's youth movement (NUPA) gave the fascist salute to the audience. According to Turner, "the New Party held an open air meeting in Batchelor Street… at which the Fascist Hymn was played… and members of NUPA gave the Fascist salute."[262] The rally clearly marked the party's shift from its earlier rhetoric.

In the months after the rally, the New Party fully embraced fascism. Mosley formally dissolved the New Party in April 1932, retaining only its National Union of Progressive Associations (NUPA) wing; the local meeting on Batchelor Street was later cited as evidence that NUPA had "rapidly become overtly Fascist."[263] On 1 October 1932 Mosley launched the British Union of Fascists (BUF) to supersede the New Party.[264] Locally, some ex-supporters withdrew. In August 1932, Martin Woodroffe explicitly condemned the party's Italo-German Fascism, including the Nazi salute and uniforms, in a letter to the Chatham News. Historian Turner concludes that the rally and Woodroffe's break were part of the New Party's rapid decline after its electoral failure.

Batchelor Street today

Batchelor Street is today a short, pedestrian-only link from Chatham's High Street/Pentagon shopping area toward Solomon's Road.[265] It remains narrow and signed "no motor vehicles," and in July 2024 Medway Council formally included the High Street end in the town's pedestrian zone. The street is lined on both sides with mixed retail and residential use. Key features include:

- **Layout & access:** Batchelor Street runs south from the High Street into the Pentagon area. The entire south end has been pedestrianised and vehicles are banned at the High Street entrance. A Barclays bank branch at 263–265 High Street[266] sits at the corner, meaning the street runs immediately behind that block.[267] This branch will close permanently from 12 pm on Friday, 12 September 2025, and relocate to Unit 5, Dockside Outlet Centre, with the new branch opening in autumn 2025.[268] (Local directions to the nearby assessment centre instruct visitors to "look for Barclays Bank and turn into Batchelor Street".)[269]
- **West side (Nos. 1–5):** Modern shopfronts and flats occupy the west side. For example, No.1 is a Halfords auto/cycle store. Other ground-floor units house local services such as solicitors (Olives Solicitors at No.2[270][271] and various takeaways or convenience shops[272] (pizza/takeaway outlets,[273] vape shops, etc.).
- **East side (older buildings):** The east side consists of a late-Victorian terrace of buildings. The historic **Jolly Caulkers pub** (No.1-3)[274] anchors this row. These 19th-century buildings have survived modern redevelopment, giving the street a heritage character.
- **Redevelopment:** At the north end a new six-storey mixed-use block is under construction on the corner with The Brook Behind this, Solomon's Road now has a small public car park and a new block of flats lining it. In general Batchelor Street today is a mix of old and new buildings, as envisaged by Chatham's town-centre masterplan.
- **Public facilities:** The building at 1A Batchelor Street houses a Department for Work and Pensions "Chatham Assessment Centre" (for benefits/health assessments).[276] This property was reportedly sold by the Royal Naval Benevolent Trust in 2018–19, suggesting the centre occupies a former trust-owned building.[277]

Chatham Medical Assessment Centre (used for PIP assessments) - 1a Batchelor Street, Chatham,[275] (11 June 2025)

Jolly Caulkers pub

The **Jolly Caulkers pub** at No.1-3 Batchelor Street still occupies its original late-Victorian building. The Jolly Caulkers is a longstanding public house on Batchelor Street. It has operated here since at least the late 19th century. Census and directory records show a James Brockwell listed as a beer retailer at "1 Fullalove Alley" (the former name of Batchelor Street) in 1881–82.[278] Members of the Brockwell family continued as licensees into the early 20th century (e.g. James Brockwell appears again in 1891 and 1901). By 1911 the pub was run by Stephen Stuppell (listed as "Beer House Keeper"), and by 1938 a Mrs. Jane A. Offen is recorded as the licensee. These records indicate the pub's name and use have remained continuous for well over a century.

Modern heritage and changes

Several historic Brook-area buildings have heritage status or have been demolished. The Old Brook Pumping Station is a scheduled ancient monument[279] and open as a museum.[280] No. 18 The Brook —Dickens's childhood home[109]—along with the Salvation Army Citadel, were among several buildings demolished to make way for the Pentagon Shopping Centre.

Chatham Town Hall (The Brook Theatre) is a Grade II listed building dating 1899. In recent years the Churchills pub at *7 The Brook* closed and was stripped out. An example is the new Brook Theatre (repurposed from its previous use as the town hall).[281] A 2010s plan to redevelop the Queen Street/Slicketts Hill car parks (south of The Brook) also highlighted the long-derelict nature of some Brook-area land.[282][283]

Brian Joyce's *The Chatham Scandal* (1999) notes that in the late 19th century the area around The Brook had a notorious red-light district, and that pressures for "moral reform" influenced some of the slum clearance and rebuilding. (Such accounts underline the Brook's historical reputation as a poor, disreputable quarter – the very sort of place Dickens himself evoked when referring to Chatham in *Pickwick*.)

Throughout its history, The Brook has transformed from a polluted ditch in a slum to a modern urban street.[284] Today it still recalls its past in place-names: Sly Kates Lane, known today as Slicketts Hill, Cage Lane, known today as Upbury Way,[285] and in surviving buildings, even as much of the old geography lies buried underground.

The historic Jolly Caulkers pub (7 April 2013)

Batchelor Street (24 June 2025)

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Further reading

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External links

- Chatham, Kent
- A231 road
- Pentagon Shopping Centre
- Old Brook Pumping Station
- Chatham Ragged School
- Postcodes covering The Brook

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